
Inside Reporting

Tim Harrower

5

Covering the news

Covering a beat

Beat reporters focus on specific topics or institutions

- New beat
 - Do research.
 - Talk to your predecessor.
 - Achieve a mind-meld with editors.
 - Meet people.

Make lists:
Key sources.
Upcoming meetings
and events.
Story ideas.

Covering a beat

Working a beat: Do's and don'ts

DO

- Familiarize yourself.
- Follow the money.
 - Call sources back.
 - Write for your readers, not for your sources.

DON'T

- Get too cozy.
- Waste sources' time.
- Simply mimic.

Writing Obituaries

Death is news

Obituaries are read more closely by more people than any other part of the paper.

- They tell stories.
- They touch hearts.
- They honor and inspire.

What's the difference?

Death notice — brief announcement with basic facts.

Obituary — longer announcement and provides more history and detail.

Writing Obituaries

Watch your language

- Addresses.
- Cause of death.
- Past personal
- Problems.
- Flowery phrases.

Other terminology

- Funerals are *scheduled*.
- Masses are *celebrated*.
- People die *unexpectedly*.
- People die *after* surgery.
- A man is *survived* by his wife.

Writing Obituaries

Obituary checklist

- Use full names.
- Find a phrase that best summarizes this person.
- State age simply unless asked to omit.
- Avoid details in mentioning cause of death.
- Include birth date and birthplace.

Writing Obituaries

Obituary checklist

- List education, military service, honors and career achievements.
- Name survivors in immediate family.
- Include name and phone number for funeral home.

Writing Obituaries

Writing standard news obituary

Emphasize person's significance in lead.

Lead should include:

1. Name.
2. Major accomplishment or occupation.
3. Day, location and cause of death.

If natural cause of death, focus on personal history.

If unusual cause of death, details should precede the background info.

More prominent get more quotes.

Writing Obituaries

The feature obituary

- Looser, friendlier style.
- Create an illusion of intimacy.
- Omit attributions.

Writing Obituaries

Talking with families about the deceased

- Don't be squeamish.
- If you're not sure what to say, use a script.
- Be supportive.
- Be willing to listen.
- If it will be a long obituary, gather as much detail as possible.
- Avoid the awkwardly obvious.

Covering Disasters



How do editors decide what is and is not a news story?

- Severity: death, damage or injury
- Impact: how many people are affected
- Proximity: The more local it is, the more impact on your readers.

How to prepare

- Anticipate worst-case scenarios
- Check your history
- Obtain information on local agencies' emergency planning
- Keep a phone list handy
- Devise a newsroom battle plan
- Prepare a field kit

What to do when you arrive on the scene?

- Go to where the action is
- Question authorities first
- Talk to victims and eyewitnesses
- Record details that capture the scene
- Check in often with your editors, and collaborate

Dealing with victims

- Ask permission
- Go slowly
- Empathize – but watch what you say

Covering fires

Reporting and writing fire stories

- Identify yourself.
- Find the command post.
- Introduce yourself to command.
- Get as close as you can.
- Wear boots.

Covering fires

Reporting and writing fire stories

Firefighters only see part of the story.

Watch your language.

- ✓ Be specific
- ✓ Destroyed
- ✓ Conflagration
- ✓ Holocaust
- ✓ Guts
- ✓ Razed

Covering fires

Fire story checklist

- ✓ Victim names.
- ✓ Extent of injuries/cause of death.
- ✓ Type of building.
- ✓ Location.
- ✓ Time.
- ✓ How the fire was discovered.
- ✓ Cause of fire.
- ✓ Number of fire fighters.
- ✓ Estimated cost of damage.

Covering fires

Fire story checklist...

- ✓ Extent of insurance coverage.
- ✓ Acts of heroism.
- ✓ Weather.
- ✓ Effect of fire on evacuees.
- ✓ Plans to relocate victims or rebuild structures.
- ✓ Arrests or citations.
- ✓ Anecdotes and descriptions.
- ✓ Any other unusual aspects.

Covering fires

Organizing stories on fire

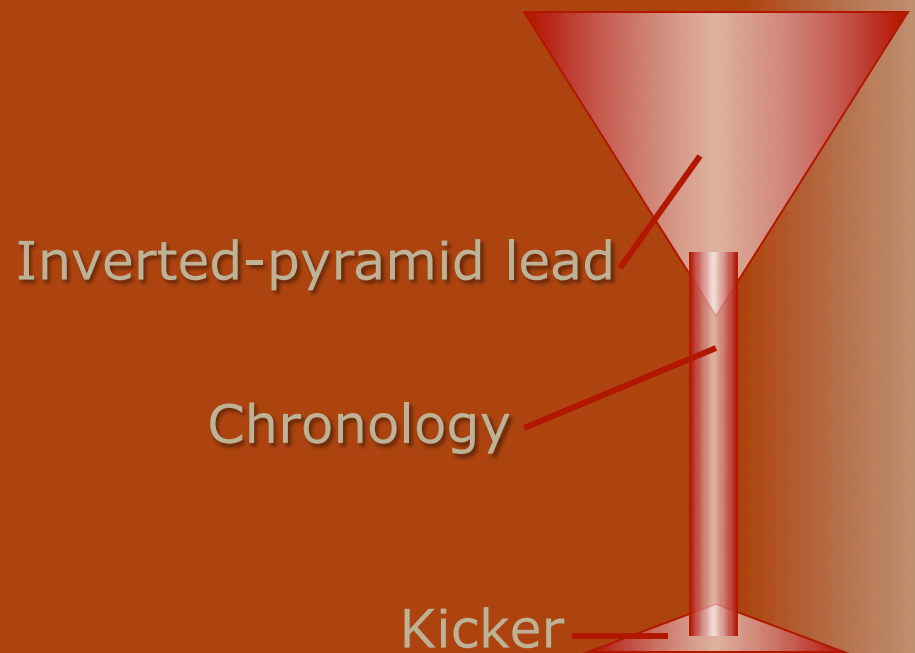


1. Death or injury usually the lead.
 2. Focus on the most
 3. compelling aspect.
 4. Cover the aftermath.
- May offer opportunity to use narrative storytelling.

Covering Crime

Crime writing style and structure

- Add color, not clutter.
- Avoid sloppy allegations.
- Explore chronological story forms.



Covering Crime

Covering the crime beat

- Get to know everyone.
- Find what information is available.
- Get familiar with police procedures.
- Use a scanner.

Covering Crime

Covering the crime beat

- Be prepared for anything.
- Think trends.
- Convey the human drama.
- Remember teachers, coaches, ministers and public officials are big news.

Covering Crime

What you should withhold

- Names of minors.
- Names of victims of sensitive crimes.
- Names of endangered victims.
- Labeling people as suspects.
- Stereotypes.

Covering Crime

Homicide or assault story checklist

- Victim's name.
- Extent of injuries/cause of death.
- Location.
- Time.
- Circumstances.
- Description of suspect.
- Name and identification of anyone arrested.
- Comments.
- Unusual factors.

Covering Crime

Theft story checklist

- Type, value of items taken.
- Victim
- Location.
- Time.
- Circumstances.
- Description of suspect.
- Name and identification of anyone arrested.
- Comments.
- Unusual factors.

Covering Courts

**Most trials aren't newsworthy,
except:**

- Murder cases.
- Celebrity trials.
- Important legal rulings.
- Human-interest stories.

Covering Courts

Covering the court beat

- Do your homework.
- Learn to navigate court records.
- Monitor future cases.
- Study background of every case.
- Be there for key moments.

Covering Courts

Covering the court beat

- Don't trust everything attorneys tell you.
- Stay neutral.
- Double-check all your facts.
- Be balanced and careful.
- Be a storyteller.

Covering Courts

Criminal and civil court procedures

Misdemeanors – minor offenses

Felonies – serious crimes

Civil suits – resolve disputes, recover right or obtain compensation

Covering Courts

Misdemeanors

- Arrest or citation.
- Charges reviewed.
- Arraignment.
- Pretrial conference.
- Pretrial motions.
- Trial.
- Verdict/sentencing.

Covering Courts

Felonies

- Arrest or citation.
- First court appearance.
- Grand jury.
- Preliminary hearing.
- Arraignment.
- Pretrial conference/motions.
- Trial.
- Verdict/sentencing.
- Appeal.

Covering Courts

Civil suits

- Suit filed.
- Hearings and motions.
- Pretrial conference.
- Trial.
- Judgment.
- Appeal.

Covering Courts

Court story checklist

- ✓ Court name.
- ✓ Judge's name.
- ✓ Specific charges.
- ✓ Translation of jargon.
- ✓ Brief recap.
- ✓ Description and details.
- ✓ Quotes and dialogue.
- ✓ What happens next.

Covering Courts

Verdict story checklist

- ✓ Sentence.
- ✓ Details about jury deliberations.
- ✓ Reactions from central characters.
- ✓ What it means.

Covering Courts

Covering campaigns and elections

- Prioritize.
- Get to know the candidate
- Do your homework.
- Use reliable experts.
- Brainstorm story ideas.
- Spread onto the Web.



Covering Courts

Keeping tabs of governmental policies and players

Decision making.
The election process.
Money.

Getting the facts

- Meetings
- Speeches
- News releases
- News conferences
- Network of sources
- Documents

Covering Politics

4 Unfortunate truths about covering politics

- 1 Politicians lie.
- 2 Politicians will schmooze you so they can use you.
- 3 **Everybody believes your stories are biased.**

Covering Politics

4 Unfortunate truths...

- 4 People don't want to read about government process.

You must peel away
layer after layer to get
to the truth.

Covering Sports

Three most common story types

- Game stories.
- Feature stories
 - Analysis
 - Profiles.
- Columns.



Covering Sports

Game story checklist

- Final score
- Teams' names
- When and where
- Key players and key plays
- Quotes
- Strategies
- Key statistics
- Injuries
- Both teams' records
- What the game means
- Other relevant factors

Covering Sports

Advance sporting event checklist

- ✓ Significance of game
- ✓ History
- ✓ Key players
- ✓ Records and recent performances
- ✓ Quotes
- ✓ Strategies
- ✓ Injuries
- ✓ Other factors
- ✓ Who's favored
- ✓ Time, place and ticket information

Covering Sports

Compiling, crunching sport stats

- Conduct solid research.
- Take careful notes.
- Use stats selectively.
- Add charts, graphs or sidebars, if needed.

Covering Sports

Sports style

- Team name usually plural.
- High school athletes are girls and boys.
- Abbreviate league names.
- Avoid native American team names.
- Use figures for measurements.
- Use numerals for scores and time.

Covering Sports

Tips for the sports beat

Covering events

- Know the sport.
- Cultivate your sources.
- Ask tough, pointed questions.

Writing stories

- Think plot, not play-by-play.
- Avoid jargon and clichés.
- Remember, it's a game.

Inside Reporting

Tim Harrower

5

Covering the news